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SUBJECT: CASABLANCA: POST-ELECTION TALK OF THE TOWN

Classified By: Principal Officer Douglas C. Greene for Reasons 1.4  
(b), (d).

REF: RABAT 01617

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Casablanca, with its diverse population, represents a cross-section of Morocco and reactions here to the recent elections and formation of a new government are revealing. While voter turnout across the country was only 37 percent, it was an embarrassing 27 percent in Casablanca. Casablanicans' lack of trust in the system, charges of widespread corruption and poor management, or simple disinterest or confusion - all combined to keep almost three quarters of voters away from the polls.

¶2. (C) The appointment of the new Prime Minister, Abbas El-Fassi, was a disappointment to most Casablanicans. However, while there is a general lack of confidence in the new Prime Minister, the verdict is still out on the 33 new members of his government. Of even greater interest in Casablanca, however, is the fact that the party that led Casablanca in popular votes and the number of seats won in parliament, the Islamic Party of Justice and Development (PJD), was excluded from participation in the government. Many Casablanicans, whether pro-PJD or anti-PJD, would like to see what the party can do. Many also believe that the PJD may very well be given the chance in the 2009 municipal elections -- if the government remains neutral.  
End Summary

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Transparent Democratic Elections - Really?  
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¶3. (SBU) For the September 7, 2007, parliamentary elections only 37 percent of registered Moroccan voters bothered to show up at the polls, and an even lower 27 percent participated in Greater Casablanca. In a city of nearly six million residents, boasting a population that includes some of the richest and poorest in the country, educated and illiterate, urban dwellers and recent rural migrants, the statement was clear, according to many Casablanicans we have spoken with: "we don't trust the system and we don't care." Numerous Casablanican contacts quietly scoffed at praise from abroad applauding Morocco's electoral success.

¶4. (SBU) That said, most Casablanicans we talked with acknowledged improvement, even while expressing serious doubts. "Maybe this election day was cleaner than before," one young caf customer told us, "but what about before the day of the elections, were people watching [for corruption] before?" "You saw what happened, Istiqlal

won," another customer chimed in. "They have done this before and have the best system for buying votes." However, while many were skeptical of claims of a "clean" election, the majority of Casablancans we spoke with readily admitted that there appeared to be a concerted and public effort on the part of the government to curb corruption in the elections, a noted change from the past. But, when asked if he thought the elections were "democratic," one patron chuckled and walked away.

15. (C) A senior PJD member we met with over "iftar" during Ramadan spoke frankly about his party's views. Bribes and corruption were widespread, in advance of the elections, he charged. Many parties paid voters to come out and vote for them. Yes, the government had taken some widely-publicized steps to crack down on corruption in the months in advance of the elections, but during election week, the government was a "study in neutrality" on corrupt practices by parties. Second, management of the elections was poor. Our contact cited many citizens who had registered, but whose names were not on the voters lists when election day came (and who therefore were not allowed to vote). "My mother, for example," he exclaimed. Third, re-districting ("Texas-style," he smiled) had been effectively implemented by the government in the period before the elections to be certain that in key areas, the party with the most votes would not win the most seats. The clear goal of the King, in sanctioning this effort, was to be sure that no one party could win big - that the parliament would necessarily be composed of many parties, with no one able to exert undue influence.

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X Marks the Vote  
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16. (SBU) Despite efforts by the government to run a cleaner election and encourage voter participation, the vast majority of Casablancans simply did not vote. On election night, poloff dined with a group of ten well-educated Moroccan business people. The only one of the ten who voted was a woman from a political family in Rabat with a PhD from Duke University. The nearly unanimous reason for abstention by the others present was the unwavering certainty that their votes were irrelevant. When asked if they were concerned about the PJD apparently winning a majority of the popular vote in Casablanca, this very liberal assemblage dismissed any concern about the possibility of an Islamist government. Expressing support for democracy up to a point, they noted that "the king would never let things get out of hand." Many of this small class of affluent young Casablancans put their complete trust in the 44 year-old monarch and have little concern that their comfortable situation will deteriorate as long as the King controls all key decisions in the country.

17. On the other end of the spectrum, we spoke to a number of residents from some of the most impoverished communities in Casablanca who did and did not participate in elections. None were very well informed about parties or candidates. "I just went in and made my "x" but I don't know any of the candidates," chuckled a tiny old man working as a caretaker in one of Casablanca's middle class neighborhoods. "I gave somebody a job for a few years" he smiled. Many people with whom we spoke did not vote because of unfamiliarity with the candidates or confusion about the vast number of party symbols. Some we met voted for the PJD, explaining that it was the only non-corrupt party and the only one which was visible throughout the year in the dilapidated neighborhoods. One young recent high school graduate we spoke to from Sidi Moumen wanted to participate but did not have an idea for whom to vote. "I like horses" he joked "so I marked the horse (the symbol for the Constitutional Union Party)."

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Disappointment with the PM and MPs  
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18. (C) When the King appointed Abbas El-Fassi Prime Minister there was an audible groan from the Casablancans who were paying attention. In his role as Minister of Labor, El-Fassi promoted - presumably unknowingly - the bogus ploy of an Emirati company to hire 30,000 Moroccans in 2002, bilking Moroccan's out of hundreds of thousands of dollars. Moroccans have not forgotten this fiasco, and view it as an indication of El-Fassi's incompetence (reftel). To boot, El-Fassi served as Ambassador to France from 1990-1994, during a period one

contact deemed one of the "worst in Moroccan-French relations." Recently, many took it as a grim sign that the new Prime Minister failed to propose a complete cabinet by the October 12 deadline set by the king.

¶9. (C) To our surprise, even some strong advocates for democratic and transparent change came out against the King's decision to appoint El-Fassi despite the fact that as Secretary General of the winning party he was the obvious choice. Younes Naoumi, president of Association Action Jeunesse, a Casablanca-based NGO that received MEPI funding for a youth election program, was very outspoken in his dissatisfaction with the new PM. While Naoumi admitted that, yes, appointing the head of the winning party was democratically the proper measure, he couldn't help feeling like it was "taking a step backwards." Naoumi, however, is waiting for what he calls the real test, local elections in 2009.

¶10. (SBU) In the short period since the palace announced the new government on October 15, some Casablangans have reacted with further cynicism. One local professional told poloff that she and her colleagues got together the morning after the announcement to discuss the appointments. They even consulted the new ministers' biographies on the internet since so many names were unfamiliar. "It's a disaster," she said. "So many of these people have no experience at all or they are just the same old men." Others we spoke to echoed her feelings of disappointment, however, sometimes with the hopeful caveat that even though the PM was from the old school, there was still a chance for positive movement if he made some sweeping changes.

¶11. (SBU) Others, nevertheless, seemed more than willing to take a wait and see approach. Many of the newly appointed technocrats, they said, could provide the energy needed to revive the parliament. Even so, there is a fear from some corners that the new ministers may find themselves facing roadblocks to changes they propose. By far the majority of Casablangans we spoke with, however, were simply uninterested in the workings of the government in Rabat.

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What about the PJD?  
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¶12. (SBU) The Islamist PJD did well in the popular vote throughout the country, winning the majority, with 503,396 votes against new ruling party Istiqlal's 494,256. In Casablanca, PJD candidates won at least one seat in nearly every district. The only exception was of the affluent Anfa neighborhood, where oddly enough, another candidate from the Islamist Party of Renaissance and Virtue (PRV) won a seat. As noted above, many believe nationwide redistricting, completed only months before the elections, was responsible for the PJD coming up short in the number of seats the party won throughout the country. In Casablanca, this was almost certainly the case. The PJD's image of honesty and concern resonates here not only in the poorer neighborhoods but with many middle class city dwellers who see the PJD as the only party against corruption.

¶13. (SBU) Although there was a general consensus on why the PJD did so well in the city, even the most stalwart secular liberals seemed unconcerned. "I would have loved to see them in the government just to screw up," said a U.S.-educated Moroccan shop owner in an upscale neighborhood. The sentiment is echoed by many in Casablanca who believe that as long as the PJD remains in opposition, they will remain the underdog heroes who, in the eyes of many, could save the country if only given a chance. "Let them show what they can do," is a statement often heard in cafes around the city from both sides of the fence. Overall, however, very few Casablangans see any changes ahead regarding their real concerns -- jobs, increasing food prices and housing -- no matter who is in power. "Nothing will change with the new government" is a refrain we often hear.

¶14. (C) Our senior PJD contact put it differently. The regime is hurting itself, he said, by keeping the PJD out of the government. The PJD is the vehicle for Islamist sentiment and emotion in the country, and to the extent those who hold Islamist views are blocked from participation in government, then there will be problems down the road. The PJD in opposition does not serve the interests of long-term stability in Morocco -- an interest which the PJD shares with the regime, he claimed.

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Local Elections in 2009  
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¶15. (SBU) According to Lahcen Haddad, national board member of the Popular Movement Party, "redistricting worked well for the government in the national elections, but wait until 2009." The PJD could win big in the local elections if there is no government interference, he predicted. Many Casablancans share that view, and believe that the 2009 local elections may be a crossroads for the city. Some here feel that if the GOM is truly committed to transparent democratic elections, it must remain on the sidelines. Moreover, they say that for the general population to regain faith in what they perceive to be a corrupt system, the oversight of the 2007 elections must be improved upon.

¶16. (SBU) Naoumi, who believes that local elections provide the only opportunity for a real democratic exercise under the current system, also thinks the PJD will do well in local elections. "If they win" he says, "we will have to see what they do in office." Naoumi, who is considering a run in his district in 2009, is an independent youth activist who has much direct knowledge of the PDJ. "They know how to reach out to the people" Naoumi told poloff. He related a story about a recent concert, organized by his NGO, to promote youth participation in the parliamentary elections. "I sent invitations to the youth organizers of five leading parties" he said, "I received one regret from the PPS and a phone call from the office of the PJD's Secretary General saying the youth director would attend. He was

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there talking to people. That means something." No other party representatives attended the event.

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Comment  
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¶17. (SBU) There is a great deal of cynicism and apathy about the current political situation among many of those we talk with here. Suggestions that the new government will usher in positive changes are met with apprehension at best and outright dismissal at worst. But the focus here is on other issues: the high level of unemployment, the increases in the price of commodities, and the increase in crime in the city's neighborhoods. If, as most doubt, the new government can make some improvements in the economic and security situation before the municipal elections, there may be stronger support for members of the current government's parties. If, however, the situation remains the same or deteriorates, the door will be left wide open for a PJD landslide. Casablancans of different strips seem more than willing to give the Islamist party the opportunity to make a difference. End Comment.

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